

Report of the 1st Week-end Seminar at the University of Oslo on 'Conflict Resolution in Developing Countries' (22.02.01 - 26.02.01)

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Background

“Whose Education for all? The Recolonisation of the African Mind” - this book by Birgit Brock-Utne¹ was actually the background for us, a group of students from the Department of Political Science of the Free University of Berlin especially interested in African Politics, to undertake a weekend trip to the Faculty of Education² of the University of Oslo.

To understand how this all started, imagine our professor Kum'a Ndumbe III running around the IPRA (International Peace Research Association) Conference of Tampere looking for the author of the book mentioned above, which had just been published. When he finally found her, this was the starting point of a personal, but also professional relationship that has already borne fruits.

The first of these fruits was the visit of professor Brock-Utne to Berlin in November 2000. The lecture she held on ‘Western Educational Aid towards African Countries’ and the many informal discussions were thrilling and enriching experiences for us and opened up many new perspectives for our scholarly work.

Apparently Birgit was touched by our hospitality: our taking her to places in Berlin where she had never been and introducing her to Berlin's traditions (like having breakfast every day in a different place!). Before she left, it was already clear that we would be invited to Oslo to meet her students. The trip was planned as a weekend seminar featuring lectures by Prof. Birgit Brock-Utne and Prof. Kum'a Ndumbe III and other very interesting people we will introduce later, on “Conflict Resolution in Developing Countries,” a topic both have been working on for many years. The important difference with other, rather common, perspectives on this topic, was the focus on “Indigenous Conflict Resolution Techniques” and in how far these techniques are taken into account by the ‘Donor Community’ and by the states themselves.

As all of us had attended seminars of either Prof. Kum'a Ndumbe III or Prof. Brock-Utne, we all were already very well prepared and ready to engage in a very constructive discussion (more about this later).

A 17 Hour Trip

7:30 a.m. Meeting point: Heidelberger Platz.

Snow and heavy winds - a sign from heaven? Yes, our trip is headed northwards.

Final destination: Oslo, the capital of a country that borders the polar circle. It is going to be cold, bitter cold, with glaciers on the streets of Oslo. No way to walk without stumbling for more than two metres. Norwegians are said to be born with the ability to keep their balance without problems - when there is nothing but cruel ice everywhere.

Luckily, the streets on our way to Oslo were not covered with this northern threat. On the contrary - they were perfect! 9 o'clock in the evening and no car but our VW Minibus was going to Oslo. It was almost frightening, the emptiness - did we get something wrong there? Hard to understand for Germans being used to endless "Staus" (traffic jams) on the

¹ See her Homepage at: www.uio.no/~bbrock/ or several texts on our Website: www.africavenir.org

² See the Departments Website at: <http://www.uio.no/>

"Autobahn" ... Pardon, we were not only Germans in our car. Marie, Florent et Anne, the French, vs. Bettina, Marek, Rosa, the Africans...I mean Germans! Of course, we are all afrophiles, AFROSIS! "All in one boat". A good team.

Team? Marek alone drove all the way from Berlin to Oslo - a 17 hour trip. He could get some comfortable sleep on the ferry. And I guess the lights brightening Norway's Autobahn kept him awake, forgetting it was night.

We agreed to switch drivers on the way back anyway.

We also agreed on the fact that the lights for the highways of Norway are a waste of energy and money - money they should use to reduce living costs. Coffee, beer, cigarettes - everything you need is terribly expensive (something like 10 times as much as in Germany).

Four expensive days. But definitely worth it!

Cold Oslo – Warm People – Heated Debates

The warmth and hospitality of both Prof. Brock-Utne (and her husband) and her students made us almost forget how cold Oslo actually was and that almost all of us were dressed for a trip to the South, a misperception which was perhaps related to the topic?

The first day started with some sight seeing in the morning, after which we all met at the PRIO (Peace Research Institute of Oslo) office in order to get a small insight into the work of the famous Norwegian peace research institute.

The following visit to the University facilities and the first seminar, attended by people from all over the world, made us very thoughtful of our own, German or Berliner, situation. The seminar was packed with three very interesting lectures, which were started by Prof. Kum'a Ndumbe III speaking about the 'Spiritual Dimension of Conflict Prevention and Conflict Management in African Societies', and consequently the necessity to take into account and incorporate this 'African spirituality' into conflict-solving approaches and projects. We will refer to Kum'a Ndumbe III's lecture in a more detailed way, mainly because it was a very theoretical lecture on a topic most of us were not familiar with (the full text will soon be available on our Homepage), but also because it was the opening lecture, touching many relevant points and opening the debate on a variety of topics, which were also referred to by the following lecturers:

The starting point of Prof. Kum'a Ndumbe III's argument was the obvious failure of most of the 'imported' conflict prevention and resolution programmes, which are presently being tried in most of Africa, a failure illustrated by the sheer number of violent conflicts presently going on in Africa. In showing that most of these 'imported' strategies and programmes, which were conceived in Western countries, fail to even consider the history, psychology, philosophy and spirituality of African societies, Prof. Kum'a Ndumbe III argued that African countries should stop looking exclusively to the West for the solution to their own problems, a phenomenon that can be observed in most parts of Africa since the colonization of the continent. 'Decolonising our minds' can, in his eyes, be seen as a first step to coming to a better understanding of the African reality (including Africa's past) and, consequently, as a prerequisite for the development of indigenous socio-political models to overcome Africa's crisis, and deal effectively with the 'African modernity' and all its problems and challenges. Such an Africa, reconciled with herself and self-confident, could furthermore contribute, as it has done so extensively in the past, to the evolution of mankind as a whole, by providing the values required for the next 'higher stage of Humanity,' values so well expressed in the

'Ubuntu'- Philosophy³ – 'I am because we are' instead of the western 'I think therefore I am,' which has led to so much destruction, poverty and inequality in the world. A revival of indigenous African knowledge, according to Kum'a Ndumbe III, is the only possible way forward for Africa, especially in the field of social and political reconstruction, which also entails conflict prevention and resolution. The vast majority of African people today, regardless of the existing official 'Western' state structures in their countries, which in no way reflect their cultures nor their will or choice, still live within traditional structures. This is but one of the reasons why the spiritual dimension becomes a pivotal one in resolving inter-personal as well as inter-group or inter-state conflicts in Africa. In the African philosophy⁴, the whole universe is perceived as consisting of vital forces. Our world and, consequently, nature and human beings, are only parts of that universe, not its very centre as in the occidental philosophy. These vital forces rule everything including human relations and inter-group relations. As the manifestation of a conflict is seen as the rupture of the flow of these vital forces, conflict resolution aims at re-establishing that flow, at Reconciliation and 'Restorative Justice'⁵ (in opposition to the 'Western' notion of justice, which aims at establishing right and wrong) and includes a whole range of symbolic gestures, including the acceptance of guilt, the plea for forgiveness and a following sacrificial 'Cleansing-Ritual'⁶. Although many of these indigenous mechanisms still exist and are used by the majority of Africans all over the continent at the family and community level, much research needs to be undertaken to make this knowledge relevant at national and perhaps at international levels. Kum'a Ndumbe III's last point was that the so-called 'African Elite,' which is for a large part responsible for the present African crisis and the defeat of African liberation movements (illustrated by an only formal independence of African states and the persistence of dependency structures), should go back to the 'African School,' meaning that the simple, everyday people of Africa would have much to teach them about 'being truly African.'

This last remark provoked especially many controversial comments: Some, while sustaining many of the professor's viewpoints, argued that the very task of defining today what is really indigenously African might, with regard to the 'Triple African heritage' (indigenous African, Muslim and Western civilization), be a very difficult one.

Others had some difficulties with the term 'African' (there were participants from Zambia, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania), arguing that the continent was too diverse to speak of a common 'African Culture' or 'African Traditions.' While the diversity of African cultures was never questioned by the Professor, he nevertheless maintained that there were very many similarities all over the continent, which should be much more drawn on than has been the case until today.

Generally many of the attendants, especially the Africans, were clearly grateful to the professor for underlining the relevance of African cultures in resolving African problems, as mainstream academic research mostly doesn't even consider 'Culture.'

Professor Birgit Brock-Utne was next to speak and in many ways her lecture was an illustration and a completion of many of Prof. Kum'a Ndumbe III's arguments: by providing examples of African traditional conflict resolution skills, she not only demonstrated that many of these skills still exist in Africa today, but also proved their functionality in African societies. All these methods were participatory, collective processes aiming at the restoration

³ Louw, Dirk J., Ubuntu – An African Assessment of the Religious Other, PAIDAIA, World Conference on Philosophy 1998. <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Afri/AfriLouw.htm>

⁴ Wiredu, Kwasi, Towards Decolonising African Philosophy and Religion, African Studies Quarterly, Vol. 1, Issue 4, 1998. <http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/4/3.htm>

⁵ Koka, D.K., African Traditional Religion, Testimony Before the Truth and reconciliation Commission, East London, 18. Nov. 1999. <http://www.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/commiss/trc/atrttest.htm>

⁶ Masoga, Mogomme Alpheus, Towards Sacrificial-Cleansing Ritual in South Africa – An Indigenous African View of Truth and reconciliation, Alternation, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1999. http://singh.reshma.tripod.com/alternation/alternation6_1/14MASOG.htm

of relationships, at general consensus and reconciliation. Drawing on her rich personal experiences with peace education and peace work, she argued that Africa not only had the capacity and knowledge to solve her own problems, but that the whole world, and especially the 'northern' countries, had much to learn from Africa, and this in many ways and fields. By citing mainly African authors, she provided a comprehensive list of references that might be very useful when working on Africa. Unfortunately the many examples, including 'mata oput', 'ubuntu', 'ujamaa', 'kparakpor', 'moots' and different forms of palaver cannot be described in detail here, but the paper will soon be available on our homepage⁷, as Prof. Brock-Utne promised to send it.

Concluding this first seminar day, Ingvild Skinstad reported on a research project she was working on for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The lecture, 'The role of education in war-torn societies – didactical challenges in conflict resolution training,' provided a critique of the 'northern' so-called experts' approaches to the concept of 'Aid.' In many cases, like Rwanda and Somalia, Ingvild Skinstad demonstrated the negative effects of 'northern' aid on conflicts. Aid, she argued, can do more harm than good. By further showing that in most programmes and strategies implemented by the 'Western' donor community, there is still no reflection on the effects of 'Aid,' her main point was to raise awareness of this specific issue – the necessity to be aware of the fact that what foreign actors (in education or in other fields of aid) are doing, is not necessarily 'good' (although the will to help might be true) and that false or too much 'Aid' can also destroy social structures.

An inspiring lecture was held the next morning by Dr. Evelin Gerda Lindner⁸ on 'Peace and Dynamics of Humiliation.' Dr. Lindner, who holds doctorates in medicine, psychology and physics, is developing a theory on the concept of 'Humiliation,' trying to apply this social-psychological concept on conflicts, and conflict resolution attempts. She examines how inter-group or inter-cultural conflicts the result of previous acts, are of 'Humiliation' and how 'Third Parties' like international organisations can help resolve conflicts without 'humiliating' the parties involved, which would lead to further conflicts (the UN-Mission in Somalia is a good example, but Lindner also refers to Nazi-Germany). Although it seems that the "social process of humiliation" is a "major cause of socio-political violence, whose main elements are closely related to central aspects of the cultural repertoire of complex societies," little research is done to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of 'Humiliation.' 'Humiliation,' she argues, "should be understood as not simply an extreme or marginal condition, but a central feature of the social order," a consequence of hierarchical relationships at a personal, local, national and even at a global level. 'Humiliation' is characterized by, in Paolo Freire's terms if I dare use them in this context, an 'Anti-Dialog,' an unequal relation between persons, groups or states. 'Humiliation' was a central feature of Colonialism and continues to be very present in the new phase of Globalisation – characterized by a 'cultural hegemony' of the 'North' based on its military, financial, scientific and technological power. 'Counter-humiliation,' understood as the dismantling of hierarchies to reach a new phase of humility and equality, is a process that can take different forms, ranging from the acceptance of 'Humiliation' by both parties, the imitation of the 'master' (desiring to acquire his knowledge, language, wealth, etc,...) and finally the rebellion against 'Humiliation' which can be very violent and even lead to genocide, as in the cases of Nazi-Germany or, recently, Rwanda. One of Lindner's conclusions is that 'counter-humiliation' nevertheless can be used constructively by restoring 'Dialog,' the opposite of hierarchical relations, between the different parties aiming at consensus, reconciliation, and more humanity and humility, a process that can actually be observed in the new South Africa and could be termed the 'Nelson Mandela

⁷ Soon available at: <http://www.africavenir.org>

⁸ See her Homepage at: <http://www.uio.no/~evelin/> and several articles on our Website: <http://www.africavenir.org> ; see also <http://www.ideajournal.com/lindner-willing-executioners.html>

approach' to social reconstruction and societal reconciliation. In this sense 'Third Parties' trying to help solve the conflict should not aim primarily at pacifying conflicts at any cost, since a forced and not widely accepted peace can bear many 'nuclear bombs of emotions' and lead to future violent conflicts. Rather, Third Parties should focus on creating alliances, minimising 'Humiliation' and restoring Dialog or, in Kum'a Ndumbe III's words, at restoring the flow of vital forces. Unfortunately most international 'mediators' and 'conflict-resolution experts' enter a country with ready-made solutions, without any understanding of historical 'Humiliation'-processes that have led to the present conflict, without any understanding of the culture and, consequently, of the way conflicts are perceived and resolved in many non-Western societies like the African societies, a behaviour that can easily lead to further 'Humiliation,' as the belief to hold 'universal truths' is in itself arrogant and humiliating. Unfortunately the next lecturer, Titus Tenga from Tanzania, due to a personal tragedy, could not attend the seminar. His topic, 'The Conflict in Rwanda – How can we understand it?,' was developed by Onyango Makogango. It focussed on the role of 'international capital,' or the international economical dimension of conflicts and the role played by Capitalism, and led to a heated debate and gave us all the opportunity to discuss delicate points. Although there was near consensus on the role played by the international community, especially the Belgians, in the creation of ethnic tensions in one of the most homogenous nations on the African continent, his interpretation of Rwandan history was contested by several attendants. Makogango also maintained that, although there were many differing opinions, looking back into Africa's past for solutions of its contemporary problems was a waste of time and that attributing any peculiarities to African culture was a kind of racism.

Generally speaking, these two days of seminars in Oslo were a great inspiration for all of us, for both our own research and academic work, and for the internal relations within the group. Connections could be established to NGOs, to many people working on similar topics and with similar ideas, creating a network badly needed among people working in and on Africa. For Links and Full-Text-Articles see our Homepage.

Diversion

In continuation of the mentioned tradition started when Prof. Brock-Utne was in Berlin, having long breakfast-ceremonies everyday in different places, our daily programme comprised at least one 'meal-ceremony,' during which many informal palavers took place and friendships were established. The Ethiopian restaurant 'Mesop' (which stands for the traditional Ethiopian round table) was probably the most impressive of these ceremonies, with the 'ceremony master,' the owner of the restaurant, teaching us both in Ethiopian history and eating traditions. A traditional coffee-making ceremony and an Ethiopian dance session completed an unforgettable evening. We couldn't leave Norway without tasting the kjøtboller and visiting the ski-jumping hill at Holmenkollen, which we did the second day of our stay. Due to snow and ice, the road to Holmerkollen turned out to be a slippery business, which led even Kum'a Ndumbe III to adopt the 'traditional' Norwegian way of moving. Some, on the other hand, used the slippery ground to demonstrate their equilibrium, which often looked much like tango sessions. Characteristic of our Professor's good and relaxed mood was his recognition after 4 days in Oslo: "It's a little slippery here, isn't it?"

On Sunday, our last day in Oslo, Prof. Brock-Utne organised a big party at her beautiful house, situated on a peninsula outside of Oslo. Group after group came to meet at what was to become a truly multicultural party. Chinese, Peruvian, Tanzanian, German, French, Cameroonian, Ethiopian, Sri Lankan, Zambian, Norwegian and Chilean guests, along with many others, brought some food speciality with them. So many different cultures chatting,

dancing and eating together showed us all once more that the future of our common world ought not be the 'Clash of Cultures and Civilizations' but rather a 'Dialog' between cultures leading to mutual learning, sharing and reconciliation, the much mentioned higher stage of Humanity!

It remains for us to thank all who participated in the seminar for their interest in the topic; to all those who took part in organizing our stay and the many activities: We thank you for your engagement and especially thank Birgit Brock-Utne and her husband, Gunnar Garbo, for organising the seminar and for their hospitality during those four days. Of course you all are welcome anytime in Berlin, and you will soon get an official invitation for a collective counter-visit. It just needs to be organised and coordinated.

So thank you all again for everything and good luck for those who are presently writing their theses.