

War Begins in the Minds of Men

by Raphael Vergin

Whether it is Catholics in Northern Ireland or Basques in Spain, cultural arguments have been used to reject what is seen as foreign rule. Culture plays a key role in the way conflicts between different groups and ethnicities play out and it must play its part in resolving conflicts. But how? Cross-border cultural and educational programs have powerful potential for promoting peace in many places around the world.

When understood as a dynamic, multi-faceted and often unconscious vehicle for identity and meaning, culture can shape perceptions, judgments and ideas about what constitutes 'us and them'. It can separate the 'normal' from the 'strange' and unfortunately in this way can engender an 'us against them' mentality. As a result, cultural devaluation and identity crises amongst marginalized ethnic groups are often the root cause of internal conflicts in many countries.

Secessionist movements often dispute the right to rule of 'the others' on the basis of their cultural differences: the Catholics in Northern Ireland, for example, or the Basques in Spain and the Palestinians in Israel. In one of the forgotten conflicts of our time, the independence struggles in the Casamance region of Senegal, nation-building and ethnicity are central to the conflict. In simple terms, the ruling elites are rejecting the cultural otherness of those on the periphery.

The creation of the African union in 1963 provided the continent with a territorial/nationalist model. This led to political elites in nation states such as Senegal trying to absorb different ethnic patterns of identity and specific cultural characteristics in order to create national unity and integration. This national unity was to be achieved through homogeneity and through assimilating the 'otherness of peripheral groups'. In order to gain access to the political and economic resources of state power, those on the periphery (as in Casamance) find themselves forced to give up their own identities in order to become part of the dominant model. Stereotypes and disparaging descriptions such as 'noble savages', 'anarchists' or 'forest dwellers who eat monkeys and palm oil' have created a sense of inferiority among the ethnic groups involved, especially the Diola people, and sparked a desire to escape such taunts. In its extreme form, opposition to such political and economic marginalization leads either to social and cultural assimilation or to violent conflict and rebellion.

By looking at a specific conflict in context and focusing on the cultural dimension, we can start to understand the potential and limitations of culture in conflict transformation. Despite the relatively high importance of ethnicity in the conflict mentioned above, the political and socio-economic prerequisites for providing equal opportunities for all ethnic groups and peoples also need to be guaranteed in terms of universal human rights, democracy, security and the rule of law. It is also vital to progress the multi-track negotiations with the fragmented rebel group *Mouvement des Forces Démocratique de la Casamance* (MFDC). After nearly 30 years of conflict, some of the group's factions are still calling for independence and keeping the struggle alive with the help of trans-national financial support.

Geopolitical implications

But the cultural dimension has much more than just a niche role to play in the complexity of the Casamance conflict – it has geopolitical implications. How, for example, do we deal with the fact that unified cultural areas can exist homogeneously across national borders but not maintain a symbolic bond with the centralised state? When the German writer and thinker Gottfried Herder wrote that “the wild mixture of various races and nations under one sceptre” is in conflict with the aims of government, then it seems fair to ask just what governments can do to create a sense of integration in spite of and on the basis of cultural diversity. I interviewed the Senegalese historian Abderrahmane Ngaide in 2007 as part of a field study on the Casamance conflict. He believes that the solution lies in cross-border regionalisation, saying that this would help increase the legitimacy of the nation state and ensure that people still feel they are maintaining their ties to their ethnic roots, while at the same time seeing the effects of economic development within the nation.

Along with improvements to infra-structure in order to increase people’s mobility and expand trade as part of creating regional economic areas, cross-border culture and education programs also offer huge potential for promoting peace. Fostering an appreciation of the culture of previously denigrated ethnic groups, promoting the maintenance of traditions, customs and cultural heritage, and creating a regional centre of excellence can all help the people of the region to develop a new, more self-confident sense of identity that is of benefit in the process of nation-building.

Africa’s past is of course totally different from that of Europe with its recent experiences of military conflicts and the redrawing of borders. Lack of political will and the fear of losing power mean that many African governments are (still) inclined to reject these kinds of transnational proposals. It may also remain too unclear what unintended consequences there might be on the fragile states and war economies of West Africa. This is where European cultural institutes and cultural policies could help in the medium-to-long term by offering advice and helping with implementation. They can also bring to bear their experiences relating to hybridity, transculturalism and identity on the delicate balancing act created by globalisation, regionalisation and nation building. Transnational cultural projects are already booming in Europe and can surely be adapted to suit the needs of other continents.

If we look more closely at current projects, we can see that cultural activities are being supported as a means of exercising soft power to deal with the consequences of protracted violence in the Casamance conflict and as part of other peace processes. Inter-ethnic festivals, peace radio, interactive theatre, films and photography all offer the potential and opportunities to overcome feelings of deprecation, division and difference between ethnic groups and to create opportunities for dialogue between formerly hostile parties. Suddenly rehabilitation, trust, humanity, reconciliation and healing start to emerge and there is the discovery of a commonality amid diversity that does not rely on a common language. It is important to be inclusive, particularly by involving people living in remote regions and not simply focusing on urban centres or elite groups.

Issues such as sustainable growth (in this instance the creative economy), gender, human rights, education, health and environment need to be addressed as part of projects dealing with culture and conflict – at the point where the link to non-violent conflict resolution is justified in the regional context and above all is triggered by the suggestions and initiatives of the local people themselves.

Overall, it is a good idea to predominantly support and promote existing local structures based on a participatory assessment of needs. Before launching projects – and not only those in the area of

culture and conflict – it could be worthwhile to invest in some cultural reconnaissance in order to get a better picture of intercultural competence and sensitivity to cultural differences and needs.

The Arab Spring has made it even more obvious that it is worth focusing on digital media and its potential to support the processes of social change by increasing pluralism. Digital media also offer an innovative way of strengthening ties between sponsors and donors and specific projects, in as much as they provide additional ways of documenting project activities and progress in a transparent way and promoting direct and interactive dialogue. Finally, from the perspective of grass-roots initiatives, it is important to find ways of creating dialogue between policymakers and the main actors in conflicts, so that these key individuals can appropriately adapt their attitudes, positions and approaches to meet the calls for peace and international understanding on the part of local people and communities, and also, quite simply, so that they talk to each other. This kind of advocacy work could well benefit from the creative methods such as the use of audio-visuals to influence the awareness and decision-making process of the key players concerned. Community radio is a widespread discussion platform that is generally well-accepted by the local population. Radio programs and radio plays are often much more successful than conferences and round table discussions at keeping people informed across wide geographic areas, irrespective of their level of education, and can influence them much more profoundly at an emotional and symbolic level.

If “wars begin in the minds of men” as suggested by UNESCO’s charter, then the reverse must also be true and overcoming violence and hostility must also start with people’s minds. This is where cultural activities have a potential role to play in helping to change people’s attitudes and behaviours. However, it is not always the case that culture is used to help prevent violence and war. As Martina Fischer and others point out in this report, it can actually contribute to violence and hatred as well. The ambivalence of culture in conflicts therefore makes it imperative to look more critically at calls for independence and freedom for the arts, at least from the point of view of culture’s practical role in conflict transformation, and even to put forward counter-arguments in favour of more control and a greater sense of responsibility.

Here, we are talking about responsibility in the sense that projects undertaken within the context of civil conflict management efforts always serve an external and interventionist function, in spite of all right and proper attempts to ensure participation, self-determination and ownership. By taking into account not only the interests of sponsors, donors and tax-payers, but also our own motivation, responsibility and willingness to learn, it is imperative that we assess whether our projects might not also have the potential to actually intensify the conflict. The principle of ‘do no harm’ must be respected.

We need to work on the basis of the lessons-learned principle so that people on the ground can be guided in a more effective way. To do this we need specific criteria, frameworks and indicators that are developed, continuously tested and enhanced in a dynamic way through dialogue and the exchange of ideas and experiences amongst all the key players from both the culture and conflict camps, in order to promote the maximum amount of peace and the minimum amount of violence.

We have to accept that it is currently very difficult and time-consuming to quickly or accurately measure progress towards peace. Having said that, it is important to focus on best practice examples that show how potential outcomes can be both devised and evaluated.

It is precisely this question we have to ask ourselves in relation to post-conflict Nepal, a country where we have for some years been running a number of projects as part of an initiative called culture4peace. Working with representatives from Nepalese civil society, we have been supporting dialogue and reconciliation processes through workshops, training sessions and community radio initiatives that build upon the success of each other. Interactive theatre, film and radio plays are all integrated as components of follow-up projects.

In this example, it is relatively easy to quantify the effects of these initiatives in terms of the numbers of people informed about civil conflict resolution; the number of participants at training sessions on the subject; the number of actors; the topics addressed; the estimated number of listeners to radio programs or audiences at films shown in villages. Age, sex, social status can all be measured and quantified. What is much more difficult to quantify is their effectiveness, the intensity of the dialogues or the transformative nature of what is said and heard.

However, in terms of monitoring and evaluation, it is possible to gather important qualitative feedback from participants (and random samples of audiences in various communities) using questionnaires, group discussions, telephone interviews and participative observation, and also to provide these people with qualitative feedback from our side. The interpersonal aspects involved in the implementation and evaluation of projects, such as trust building, non-violent communication, readiness to embrace dialogue and conflict resolution, can all be observed and assessed in the field. However, people often pursue their own interests and egotistical goals, so answers to surveys and questionnaires can be deliberately biased. Nevertheless, despite these potential shortcomings or inadequacies, and despite a lack of resources, we have had some success in terms of monitoring effectiveness and in gathering useful data based on experience, and we can build on this.

The kind of practical information gathered in the course of project work (and in this case underpinned by the experiences gained in a project that has been running since 2009 under the auspices of the Nepali Civil Peace Service, in which training seminars on interactive theatre play a key role) could and should be continuously added to, expanded and made more transparent through inter-organisational dialogue. But how can we now even think about more flexible frameworks for cultural activities in the area of conflict transformation? How can we reconcile the apparently insurmountable differences between the desire to honour the 'temple of art' on the one hand and specific peace agendas on the other?

If the causes of conflicts are infinitely complex then so are the potential solutions. For example, it is undeniable that freedom of expression is a fundamental principle of human rights, democracy and pluralism. According to democratic peace theory, these in turn can, under certain circumstances, help to foster non-violent conflict management and so promote peace. It could also be argued that every form of conflict, even the most violent, can at first be necessary, sensible and right.

Stirred to action by artists

A society that is moved and stirred to action by artists and that denounces the current state of affairs and identifies solutions, effectively shapes its conflicts and determines their form. Building stable nations and achieving national unity within Europe was a long, slow progress that often involved violent altercations.

It could be argued that independent artists should simply be given a bag of money and their freedom (within the restrictions imposed by their society at least) with our best wishes, without worrying about other issues, such as a sense of awareness. The consequences could be either positive or negative.

The fact is, those who are primarily interested in promoting a peace agenda rather than artistic freedom would need to impose strict criteria in order to ensure they have the maximum amount of control over the success of this approach. In this way they would follow an intrinsic logic that is also designed to make them less vulnerable and legitimise their own peace efforts. This could result in much creative potential being lost, but could also prevent some damage occurring, the consequences of which might be much more severe than the potential success envisaged.

Having said that, this does not mean that it is impossible for artists to be given the maximum amount of freedom in a conflict transformation situation. Various organisations, such as the Dutch Prince Claus Fund, are already supporting culture and conflict initiatives in a more flexible way. Other initiatives, such as the British Culture+Conflict program, are making a valuable contribution in terms of gathering, evaluating and publishing valuable data through their approach to documentation and best practice. What is clear is that the resulting lessons learned should be evaluated in as transparent a way as possible and widely discussed in order to be able to use the success of a more flexible approach as a key bargaining point when dealing with more conservative donors.

In principle, cultural activities should not be subject to any more restrictions than the general peace process itself, whatever the potential outcome paradigms, for it is just as difficult to effectively and quickly measure the impact of, say, a symposium, as it is to foresee in detail the potential impact of setting up a peace museum. The fact that in terms of peace work both can be equally well conceived, implemented and evaluated and that local target groups can also give important qualitative feedback on these and other similar activities should be sufficient reason to pursue both options.

There may be a benefit in shifting the discussion away from specific positive outcomes towards reflecting on potential unintended negative consequences. In this way, background checks and trust-building within the framework of freedom for the artist could help to prevent unwanted potential damage. As a result, artists would have freedom of choice in the creation and presentation of their work and would simply be 'assessed' through regular monitoring and a final evaluation for documentation. Workshops on awareness and responsibility could also be integrated into the program.

In general, there is a need to gather more data based on experience and to increase funding and resources aimed at the practical and analytical management of the cultural dimension of conflicts. The exchange of ideas and experiences within Europe could and should be actively promoted by the European cultural institutes and pursued in international and cross-discipline forums, as is the case with the informal working group Culture and Conflict, coordinated by the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Institute for Foreign Cultural relations, ifa). This provides clear evidence of the important role played in conflicts by art and culture.

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