

Faith-Based Diplomacy—A Mechanism for Conflict Resolution in Sub-Saharan Africa: Strategies and Impacts

Sylvester Ndzelen Berinyuy
Pontifical Lateran University, Rome, Italy

Since 1960, there have been more than thirty UN peacekeeping missions across Africa, the most of any region in the context of the conflicts that have plagued the region for decades. It has become increasingly evident that official diplomacy is not enough to resolve these crises. Experience shows that given the people's reliance on religion, religion has continued to act as a force of conflict prevention and resolution in the region. The role played by faith-based diplomats has gained the trust of the conflict parties such that it would be unwise for national and international actors to neglect their role in policy making and conflict prevention and resolution.

Keywords: faith-based diplomacy, parallel diplomacy, religion, conflict prevention and resolution, sub-Saharan Africa, reconciliation, forgiveness

Introduction

That name, Religion, when heard, cuts the world in a triple dimension: those who seclude it within the confines of the church, mosque, and other religious structures; those who think it has influence in every sphere of life; lastly those indifferent to the reality. But no matter the group where one identifies oneself, time and space put forth that truism that this discipline is lately out of those structures and neutrality, influencing spheres of life: economics, climate change, food insecurity, social and economic injustice, poverty and exclusion, peace and diplomacy.

Time and space demonstrate with vivid clarity the peacebuilding capacity of the said discipline. In Sub-Saharan Africa, religion represents a moral power of persuasion and action that cannot be neglected in view of the urgency of the problems confronting the region. Because of the trust they enjoy from the conflict parties, faith-based diplomats in the region continue to influence decision making especially in the context of a culture that reconciliation, forgiveness, and conflict prevention has primacy. It is a context in which the socio-economic and political upheavals in Africa of the 1960s and 70s, have led to the development of a *religion-political* vocabulary that is key to unity and conflict resolution. Such words as the *harambee*, *ujamaa*, and *ubuntu* speak of the readiness of a people to forgive, reconcile, and work together to prevent and resolve conflicts.

From Religion to Politics and Peacebuilding

In an increasing quest for modernity by African countries, one would have suggested that religion would fade away in terms of social, political, and individual influence. A keen observer of the continent for the past

Sylvester Ndzelen Berinyuy, PhD in the science of Peace and International Cooperation, Pontifical Lateran University, Rome, Italy.

decades would acknowledge that the place and influence of religion is still very much a factor in the current environment. Religion permeates and influences every aspect of African life. That is why according to John Mbiti, the ontology of an African is embodied in the saying “Africans are notoriously religious” (Mbiti, 1975, p. 27). Look at the history of the pope’s apostolic or diplomatic visitation in any country in the African continent; the crowds that often defy religious, ethnic, tribal, traditional, and cultural leanings to fill the airports, stadia, churches just to receive the “man of God” are huge. This is due to the fact that, for the people, having been failed by the political elite, religion remains the sole institution with moral legitimacy capable of igniting hope. That is why most of them won’t even participate in an event chaired by their own head of state or any important state official, both domestic or foreign. They won’t even know that a foreign head of state had visited their country but they would not miss the visit of the pope.

Religiously and culturally, an African believes not only in his welfare, but in the welfare of the whole community. Take for example the East African concept of *harambee* which encompasses a concept of placing the group before the individual. It represents an unwritten law of generosity regardless of class, ethnic group, gender, or religious background. This *religio-political* concept appears in Kenya’s coat of arms (Musau, 2020). *Harambee*, to which oral history attributes religious origins, is more than a motto, it symbolized Kenyan unity, patriotism and, most importantly, the future. Various Kenyans leaders have addressed serious national problems by evoking *harambee*.

Ujamaa is a Tanzanian concept similar to *harambee*. This Swahili word means familyhood, a socio-economic and political ideology of Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere. This *religion-political* concept incarnates three vital factors: mutual respect, common ownership of property and work obligation, and three principles of equality, freedom, and unity (Gbadegesin, 1994, pp. 50-51).

The African *Ubuntu* philosophy originating in South Africa, represents humanness, a pervasive spirit of caring within the community in which the individuals in the community love one another. It is a concept in which one’s sense of self is shaped by one’s relationships with other people. It’s a way of living that begins with the premise that “I am” only because “we are”. In practice, *ubuntu* means believing that the common bonds within a group are more important than any individual arguments and divisions within it. People will debate, will disagree; it is not like there are no tensions, and once you have debated, then what is best for the community is understood, and then you have to take that up. Nelson Mandella used it. Archbishop Desmond Tutu drew on the concept of *ubuntu* combining it with the Christian theology of the *imago Dei* (image of God) when he led South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission which helped South Africa reckon with its history of apartheid. *Ubuntu* promotes restorative justice and a community-centric ethos. Africa has the ability as a people to dig into her human values, to go for the best of them, in order to bring about healing and to bridge the gap (Ogude, Paulson, & Strainchamps, 2019).

The context of the evolution of these concepts is the socio-economic and political upheavals in post-independent Africa. In the 1960s and 70s, East Africa, like other regions on the continent, were going through a socio-economic and political upheaval (Henri & Ntozake, 2019). This shows that behind many simple expressions of belief, there often lies a profound solution to many crises and conflicts in post-colonial Africa. Religion then, is to an African an ontological phenomenon which pertains to the question of existence or being. For him, therefore, and for the larger community of which he is part, to live is to be caught up in a religious drama (Nieder-Heitmann, 1981, p. 13). It is from this background that faith-based diplomacy is likely going to be a reckoned tool in Sub-Saharan conflict resolution.

Religion in Diplomacy

The role of the state in being the sole source of legitimate authority and authenticity is being challenged. No matter how policymakers are reticent to engage with religion and often disregard the role of religion, religious institutions, and religious motivations in explaining politics and conflict, due to the historical relationship between church and state, and the structures that separate church and state (Luttwak, 1994, p. 9), religion has continued to influence the African continent. Former US secretary of States, Madeleine Albright had indicated that no diplomat should be working within a state if they do not fully understand the faiths that are active within that community (Albright, 2006, p. 8).

Douglas Johnston (2013, p. 10) has noted that the nature of conflict in the 21st century has shifted as the majority of conflicts are now intractable, identity-based conflicts in which the structures and mechanisms of diplomacy are not able to manage the ethnic, tribal, and religious manifestations of violence. For Scott Appleby (2003, p. 237), while scholarly literature has at times identified religious and cultural differences as a motivating force in conflicts, the role of religion in diplomacy is now becoming increasingly clear based on the recognition that the spiritual depths of faith and religion house positive assets that can be utilized in the diplomatic process to de-escalate tension and mitigate violent conflict.

Albright (2006, p. 4) is right to indicate that the avenues by which religious actors can engage in conflict are becoming a more pertinent conversation, along with the way in which religious values can support resolution processes. Inherent in religions are methodologies that can enhance the effectiveness of a diplomatic process to promote peace (Jafari, 2007, p. 111). Could this be the solution to the conflicts in Sahelian Africa—a kind of faith-based diplomacy for the region?

Nature of Conflicts in Saharan Africa's Post-independence Era and Faith-Based Diplomacy

After the two great world wars, precisely from 1955 to 1960, conflicts in Africa are linked to nationalism that spurs the process of decolonization. From the post 1960s, there has been a surge in intra-state conflicts especially based on ethno-nationalists' inclinations. Think of the Rwandan genocide, secessionists movements like the "Ambazonian" and Biafran movements in the anglophone region of Cameroon and Nigeria respectively. Experiences from Somalia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Cote d'Ivoire show that developments from electoral conducts and outcomes can pose real threats to democracy, peace, and stability within the region. There are the Sahelian military Coups (Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger, and Gabon) and the constitutional coups in Chad and Sudan. Sohaib Mahmoud and Mohamed Taifouri (2023) have indicated that within this same period, coup attempts are thwarted in Gambia, the Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, and the island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe.

Conflicts of religious nature but perhaps linked to terrorism have become a key concern for the region. There are the activities of the Islamic jihadist terrorist group, Boko haram operating from Northeastern Nigeria and carrying out activities in Chad, Niger Cameroon, and Mali with the aim of establishing an Islamic caliphate within the region. The Al-Shabaab based in Somalia is active elsewhere in East Africa. Karanja Mbugua (2023, p. 23) has observed that since independence, at least 32 of the 54 African countries have experienced violent conflicts. C. Mbuka (2002, p. 3) affirms that "a look at ourselves and those around us reveals the existence of conflicts at all levels: with ourselves, with God and with our fellow human beings". For years, these countries have been

looking for ways and means to restore peace. It is true that conflict prevention is one of the main obligations set out in the UN Charter, and governments have primary responsibility in this area. Resolution 1366, adopted on 30 August 2001, attests to the UN Security Council resolve to pursue this objective as an integral part of its primary responsibility, that of the maintenance of international peace and security (Routier, 2008). Nevertheless, in spite of the efforts of the international community and other actors, hotbeds of tensions have continued to multiply in sub-Saharan Africa. Hence, the urgent need for a type of diplomacy that would support and build coexistence, just, and preemptive peace. Given the religious nature of an African, it's time we give "faith-based diplomacy" a chance.

History attests to the reality of the insufficiency of traditional diplomacy (Track One Diplomacy) in specific contexts. Track One Diplomacy is not necessarily the most effective method of obtaining international cooperation or resolving disputes. Where it encounters limitations, it needs to be supported, sometimes relayed, and sometimes even supplanted, by informal diplomacy (Track II Diplomacy) which at times is referred to by its French expression as *diplomatie parallèle* to distinguish it from *diplomatie officielle*. This is a sign that today's international system is much more than a system of States. Faith-based diplomacy finds its roots in this context. Practitioners of faith-based diplomacy will, to be sure, draw upon secular expertise in conflict resolution and analysis, political science and philosophy, experience in national security, diplomacy, community development, and the like. But their central, orienting compass is their faith (Cox & Philpott, 2003, pp. 31-32).

Perhaps a clearer definition of faith-based diplomacy is that of Johnston and Cox as:

(...) a form of Track II (unofficial) diplomacy that integrates the dynamics of religious faith with the conduct of international peacemaking. As such, it is more about reconciliation than it is conflict resolution. The peace that it pursues is not the mere absence of conflict but rather a restoration of healthy and respectful relationships between the parties. (Johnston & Cox, 2003, p. 15; Johnston, 2011, p. 15)

Faith-based based diplomacy may have an upper hand in conflict resolution in Saharan Africa due to the African sentimental but rational attachment to his culture. Culture and religion are represented in this context as conjoined realities such that cultural diplomacy is necessarily faith-based diplomacy. Philip Seib (2013, p. 7) notes that religion is an influential element in culture, and thus if cultural diplomacy strategies are to be employed, religion should be a consideration of the planning and implementation of these diplomatic strategies. For an African his culture cannot be dissociated from his traditional religion thus, representing a symbiotic relationship between the two. Therefore, the two areas can be seen as variables in the diplomatic decision-making model, able to play a determining role in policy outcomes (Pokhariyal, 2015, p. 42).

Reconciliation and Forgiveness: The Approach of Faith-Based Diplomacy

Reconciliation, a concept deeply embedded in several religious traditions is the "soul" of religion. In French, the word means: to restore friendship between estranged persons, or peace between enemies, or to bring back into harmony persons who were estranged, and in everyday vocabulary: to mend fences. Louis-Vincent Thomas and René Luneau (2000) indicate that traditional Africa is built on values of which life, peace, joy, sharing, solidarity, and communion, to name a few, occupy an important place. Each cultural system provides for measures to be taken to restore broken harmony in the event of a fault on the part of a member or a group (Thomas & Luneau, 2000, p. 65). Such reconciliation is a key approach in faith-based diplomacy. Faith-based diplomats seek to not just satisfy a negative peace, but rather go beyond the resolution of conflict and engage with

reconciliation. This portrays the aim of restoration of relationships as the primary goal of this diplomatic approach (Blakemore, 2019, p. 18).

Jodok Troy (2008) says that “faith-based diplomacy is more about reconciliation than conflict resolution.” (p. 228). Being aware of the importance of reconciliation for an African which already forms part of his life, Pope Benedict XVI, in the context of the various crises that have engulfed the continent, reminds the Africans of the need of reconciliation between people and communities, and to promote peace and justice in truth for all.¹ It is because the Africans treasure reconciliation that Hutus and Tutsis of Rwandans now can live together after the genocide, and South Africans can live together after the collapse of the apartheid system. The UN secretary General, Antonio Guterres had emphasized that: “Successful reconciliation helps to prevent the recurrence of conflict, as well as forming the breeding ground for more resilient, peaceful and prosperous societies. This is especially true in the wake of large-scale violence and human rights violations.”²

Forgiveness has its own significance in the African religious, cultural, and political contexts. The French word for forgiveness, *par-donne*, has a deeper meaning from its etymological sense. It means giving over and above what exists, beyond what justice demands. In this sense, forgiveness offers new life to the guilty and, at the same time, frees the victims from the spirit of hatred and vengeance. “The profound joy of forgiveness, offered and received, heals unhealable wounds, restores relationships” (Pape Jean-Paul II, 1997). This is the method adopted by the restorative justice system widely practiced in Rwanda and South African after the genocide and apartheid in the respective countries. Many African countries are beginning to adopt the restorative justice system (Gabagambi, 2024).

Looking at the region as well as elsewhere in the continent, one easily notices that religious activities have developed in the areas of aid, foreign policy, democratization, security, and human rights. This explains the reason for the growing trust of Africans in religious institution. Religious actors are able to present themselves having a trusted relationship with the people. These longstanding relationships that transcended the boundaries of traditional politics can provide renewed momentum to potentially stagnated negotiations. For example, in Mozambique wracked by civil war, the Catholic Community of Sant’Egidio acted as intermediaries to reach a stable peace agreement at the height of the civil war, that would last for more than 20 years. A previous attempt at UN mediation had failed, and the situation seemed hopeless (Anouilh, 2005).

In Benin, the transition to democracy went off without a hitch in 1989-1990, thanks above all to Bishop Isidore de Souza. In 1990, he initiated the National Conference of the Living Forces of the Nation, attended by almost 500 delegates from all the country’s major political and social groups. Under his leadership, this National Conference managed in a few days to agree on democratic and economic reforms and to impose the renunciation of violence in all its forms. During the 1994 Rwandan genocide, only one group of the population refused to engage in violence: Rwandan Muslims. They courageously condemned violence as contrary to the Koran.³

The Catholic Church of Congo-Brazzaville, organized a Sovereign National Conference in February 1991. Just as had happened in Benin and Gabon, Congo also called on a Catholic bishop to help the country unite around the ideals of peace, reconciliation, and development. It was the Jesuit Erneste Kombo, then Bishop of

¹ Pape Beno ̄ XVI, Exhortation apostolique post-synodale, *Africae munus*, no. 1.

² Nations Unies, Conseil de s ́curit ́ la r ́conciliation ne saurait se substituer ̀ la justice, ni m ́me ouvrir la voie ̀ l’amnistie pour les crimes les plus graves, pr ́vient le Secr ́taire g ́n ́ral, 19/09/2019.

³ How Religious Actors Calm Conflicts. <https://www.deutschland.de/fr/topic/politique/comment-les-acteurs-religieux-apaisent-les-conflits>.

Owando, who was chosen to lead the conferences towards drawing up consensual rules for the nation. He led the interim period for one year until the pluralist democratic elections held in 1992.

With the conflicts that engulfed South Sudan for years, prominent figures within both local and the universal Church dedicated significant efforts to foster unity among the people of South Sudan. Bishop Paride Taban worked to foster coexistence without allowing tribal or religious biases to divide communities by establishing the *Kuron Peace village*. Kuron Peace Village has been significant in conducting peace events. In 2013 it hosted a “Peace Day” organized by the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). In 2016 seventeen traditional leaders from different parts of South Sudan gathered in Kuron to discuss the roles of customary authority in governance and their contribution to peace.

The apostolic yet diplomatic visit of Pope St. John Paul II to Khartoum in 1993 had a profound impact on the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which ultimately brought an end to a 21-year civil war in 2005 and paved the way for the referendum that led to the southerners choosing independence. In his address to President Bashir in Khartoum, the Pope urged the government to establish a state with a “constitutional formula” capable of resolving conflicts and respecting the unique characteristics of each community.⁴

In 2013, when ethnic conflict erupted and claimed many lives, the world bore witness to a profoundly humble gesture from Pope Francis. He knelt to kiss the feet of South Sudanese leaders, urging reconciliation and peace. In that moment, hope was reignited, and a sense of optimism emerged.

In Cameroon, with the raging conflict between the central government and the “Ambazonia” separatist fighters which went violent in 2016, the bishops of the anglophone region of the country have presented a Memorandum to the head of State, which has been greeted both home and abroad as an efficient document to solving the crisis.⁵

In the Central Africa Republic, religious leaders: Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, and Pastor Nicolas Guerékoyame Gbangou, united to seek both national and international support to bring peace to the war-torn nation. Here, we can cite the power of interfaith-faith dialogue in faith-based diplomacy. Prominent world leaders have made statements that highlight the importance of dialogue between faith communities, including Obama’s 2009 Cairo address. Religious leaders also have a significant influence on the general public as they mediate a progressive humanism that pursues social justice (Blakemore, 2019, p. 29).

This shows that religious leaders can persuade individuals and groups to work together. In fact, Edward Luttwak (1994, p. 17) has observed that the presence of religious leaders at the negotiating table contributes to providing a mechanism for engagement, methods of communication, assistance to diplomatic procedures, and an intermediary between competing claims. This is due to a series of factors; while the UN, multilateral organizations, NGOs, States and other actors impact diplomatic avenues, following the interests of member states and country, the faith-based diplomat doesn’t have any economic, political, or military interests. His/her interest is respect for human dignity of all. Their pervasive influence in the community, a reputation as an apolitical force for change, a unique social leverage for reconciling conflicting parties with an ability to rehumanize relationships, the capability to mobilize community, and national and international support for a peace process play to this advantage (Johnston & Cox, 2008, p. 14). Fredy Munthe (2016, p. 176) has observed that with their religious

⁴ Pope John Paul II Meeting with General Omar Hassan Ahmed Al-Bashir President of the Republic of the Sudan (10 February 1993).

⁵ Memorandum Presented to the Head of State, His Excellency President Paul Biya, by the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda on the Current Situation of Unrest in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon.

values orientation, faith-based diplomats are able to offer support and deliver services which are often viewed by the community as credible, legitimate, and justified, including delivering humanitarian assistance as part of a diplomatic program. This plays positively for the Africans and the faith-based diplomat especially at this time that Africans have lost trust on western powers, seeing them as the greedy exploiters of their natural resources and above all as those responsible for conflicts and other predicament in the continent.

For faith-based diplomacy to produce fruits in sub-Saharan Africa, statemen, policy makers, and diplomats in the region must overcome the Eurocentric secularist outlook of limiting religion from politics while viewing religious actors and beliefs as an unnecessary appendage in international affairs. While politics and religion generally remain as separate entities, there are values, principles, and norms that do overlap when examining diplomacy and religion.

Conclusion

The typology of UN interventions and peace operations for conflict prevention and resolution is not enough in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. The various examples of negotiation and mediation missions carried out by faith-based diplomats testify to the veracity of this affirmation. To ensure that the regional states succeed in their conflict prevention efforts, there is need for the involvement and the participation of other players most importantly, faith-based diplomats who are an unfailing source of support and a driving force in the promotion of peace in the region. Faith-based diplomacy here may not be an option but a necessity in this context. We believe that the presentation of faith-based diplomacy will help policy makers, both the national and international community and diplomats to grasp the essence of its necessity in the context of this region.

References

- Albright, M. (2006). Faith and diplomacy. *Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 4(2), 3-9.
- Anouilh, P. (2005). Sant'Egidio au Mozambique: de la charité à la fabrique de la paix. *Revue internationale et stratégique*, 59, 9-20.
- Appleby, R. S. (2003). Retrieving the missing dimension of statecraft: Religious faith in the service of peacebuilding. In D. M. Johnston (ed.), *Faith-based diplomacy: Trumping realpolitik* (p. 237). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blakemore, S. (2019). Faith-based diplomacy and interfaith dialogue. *Brill Research Perspectives in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy*, 3(2), 1-124.
- Cox, B., & Philpott, D. (2003). Faith-based diplomacy: An ancient idea newly emergent. *Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 1(2), 31-40.
- Gabagambi, J. J. (2024). A comparative analysis of restorative justice practices in Africa. Retrieved from https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Restorative_Justice_Africa1.html
- Gbadegesin, O. (1994). *Ujamaa: Julius Nyerere on the meaning of human existence*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University.
- Henri, M., & Ntozake, C. (2019). Contribution of John S. Mbiti to the study of African religions and African theology. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 5(3), 421-442.
- Jafari, S. (2007). Local religious peacemakers: An untapped resource in U.S. foreign policy. *Journal of International Affairs*, 61(1), 111-130.
- Johnston, D. M. (2011). *Religion, terror and error: U.S. foreign policy and the challenge of spiritual engagement* (p. 15). California, United States: Praeger.
- Johnston, D. M. (2013). An asymmetric counter to the asymmetric threat. *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 35(1), 9-14.
- Johnston, D. M., & Cox, B. (2003). Faith-based diplomacy and preventive engagement. In D. M. Johnston (ed.), *Faith-based diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (pp. 14-15). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Luttwak, E. (1994). The missing dimension. In D. Johnston and C. Sampson (eds.), *Religion: The missing dimension of statecraft*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Mahmoud, S., & Taifouri, M. (2023). The Coups d'État of the Sahel Region: Domestic causes and international competition. Arab Center Washington D.C. Retrieved from <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-coups-detat-of-the-sahel-region-domestic-causes-and-international-competition/>
- Mbiti, J. S. (1975). *Introduction to African religion*. London: Heinemann.
- Mbugua, K. (2023). Resolution and transformation of election related conflicts in Africa. *Journal of African Elections*, 5(1), 22-35. Retrieved from <https://www.eisa.org/storage/2023/05/2006-journal-of-african-elections-v5n1-resolution-transformation-election-related-conflicts-africa-eisa.pdf?x15448>
- Mbuka, C. (2002). *Pardon: Justice-Paix*. Kinshasa: Ciam-Edition l'Épiphanie.
- Munthe, F. (2016). Religious movements in humanitarian issue: The emergence of faith-based organizations (FBO) in diplomacy sphere. *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional*, 5(2), 172-180.
- Musau, M. M. (2020). Harambee: The law of generosity that rules Kenya. BBC.
- Nieder-Heitmann, J. H. (1981). An analysis and evaluation of John S. Mbiti's theological evaluation of African traditional religion (MTh thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1981).
- Ogude, J., Paulson, S., & Strainchamps, A. (2019). I am because you are: An interview with James Ogude. CHC Ideas. Retrieved from <https://chcnetwork.org/ideas/i-am-because-you-are-an-interview-with-james-ogude>
- Pape Jean-Paul II. (1997). Offre le pardon, reçois la paix. Message pour la journée mondiale de la paix. Retrieved from https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/fr/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121996_xxx-world-day-for-peace.html
- Pokhariyal, G. P. (2015). The influence of religion, technology, and economy on culture, diplomacy, and peace. *International Journal on World Peace*, 32(2), 41-50.
- Routier, T. (2008). De nouvelles dynamiques pour pratiquer la paix: études transversales des fiches d'expérience d'Irénées. Retrieved from https://www.irenees.net/bdf_dossier-1684_fr.html
- Seib, P. (2013). Introduction. In P. Seib (ed.), *Religion and public diplomacy* (p. 7). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thomas, V., & Luneau, R. (2000). *La terre africaine et ses religions*. Paris: Harmattan.
- Troy, J. (2008). Faith-based diplomacy under examination. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 3(3), 209-231.