

An Examination of the Role of Shona Folktales in Promoting Peacebuilding among Modern Communities in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *In modern Zimbabwe, tolerance and co-existence proves to be lacking in modern communities judging by violent cases especially those related to political differences. This paper is based on the hypothesis that Shona indigenous peace promoting and sustaining methods are still a thriving forest which has not been lost into oblivion, albeit transitional factors. Data is based on a sample folk tale, existing literature on folktales and insider participant observations. The paper established that folk tales are mainly concerned with conflict and its resolution, the primary goal being to sustain positive relationships, tolerance and inculcating peaceful co-existence. The paper, therefore, recommends that contemporary peacebuilding activities should blend with indigenous peace promoting and sustaining frameworks. The role of folk tales as a violence deterring mechanism among the Shona communities, though at micro level, seems to be an asset at their disposal, yet current peacebuilding activities among the Shona habitually work independently and outside the traditional parameters.*

Keywords: *Peacebuilding, Folk Tales, Shona, Conflict and Conflict Resolution*

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Conventionally, violence is understood as cyclical meaning that the violence that occurred during the colonial era, post-independence election violence in Zimbabwe can be a cause for violence in future if these remain unabated. In other words, if observations by Alexander et al (2000:1) that "violence (in Zimbabwe) has so powerfully shaped history and the memory of the past..." is anything to go by. The seemingly delays by the incumbent government since 1979 to 2009, in addressing the negative impact of the colonial and protracted conflict and post-independence electoral violence risk the triggering of a renewed violence in the whole of Zimbabwe in future. For example, a study by Reynolds (1990) conducted in Musami rural area (in Marondera district) about 60 kilometers on the eastern side of the capital Harare in 1982 showed that between 1970s and 1980 about 130 black and 23 white children lost their lives as a result of this protracted conflict. Some were shot dead, others blown by land mines, mutilated by grenades and burnt down in houses. Of the 35 children between the age of seven (7) and eight (8) interviewed by Reynolds (1990), 24 testified that they personally saw individuals drowning in rivers (with tied legs), others shot, some being buried alive and those accused of practicing witchcraft were burnt to death (p.4). If these negative impacts of violence remain unabated as the scenario seems to suggest, communities in Zimbabwe could be sitting on a time bomb.

With the coming of independence, the negative impact of violence on social relationships seems also to have gone unabated. Reports by Reeler (2008); Reeler et al (2009) showed that between 2000 and 2008 there were about 4, 765 cases of violence with 2008 considered as the worst ever since 2000. Thus, vindicating Tshuma's (2010:1) argument that: "if scars of the past are hidden away there will always come a time when those scars will suppurate and became a poison that will engulf all of us even the future generation." It may be too early to predict how the colonial,

protracted conflict and post-independence electoral violence have affected the moral fabric of the modern political community but all signs point to the direction that there was a breakdown of peaceable social norms and values. If this trend continues, it may well be that in future the traditional peaceable social norms and values that sustained Shona households and communities for centuries may come into extinction.

Questions which come to mind are: what has happened with traditional Shona peace promoting mechanisms? Which traditional Shona peaceable social norms and values are still being embraced by modern Shona communities? The current state of affairs among Shona communities shows that there is greater need for peaceful co-existences, respect, tolerance, non-violence and mutual understanding to be fostered in order to consolidate peace throughout Zimbabwe. It is against this background that this paper sought to examine the extent to which folk tales can be employed as a violence deterring mechanism among modern Shona communities in Zimbabwe.

2. METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on a sample folktale, existing literature on folktales and insiders participant observations. The writers have both intimate and empirical knowledge on folktales drawn from personal experience.

3. PEACEBUILDING THEORY

Cherry (2010, p.xiii) postulates that the term “*building* is an architecture motif.” This construction image suggests one or two elements that is, the creation of a new building or refurbishment of a structure that previously existed but was torn down (ibid., p.xiv). As such the concept of peacebuilding calls to mind a construction task where builders with trowels and bricks under their finger tips are fixing a dilapidated building or creating a new one. The picture is that of people (experts) who have an idea of what they are doing to produce the best out of hard and messy conditions in front of them.

This construction image is appropriate when one thinks about on-going efforts to maintain relationships and peaceful co-existence within and between individuals and community members. Lederach (1997:20) provides some ideas pivotal to understanding the link between peacebuilding and architecture motif. He aptly notes that “peacebuilding is a dynamic social construct...[that] requires a process of building, involving investment and materials, architectural design and coordination of labor, laying of a foundation, and detailed finish work as well as continuing maintenance.” A cross cutting notion principal to this paper by Lederach is that peacebuilding “addresses structural issues, social dynamics of relationships building and the development of a supportive infrastructure for peace” (ibid., 21).

It figures therefore, in light of the foregoing that peacebuilding has similarities with construction motif except that peacebuilding in the context of individuals or communities have some unique characteristics that need to be taken into consideration. For example, a community is characterized by intangible elements which include among others, structures, social norms, values and relationships that underpin day to day interactions. Thus, on this basis, peacebuilding is about building social harmony, co-existence, tolerance, mutual understanding and cooperation between individual members of the community. Central to peacebuilding are social relationships which Tillet (1999) describes as social ties characterized by trust, reciprocity, cooperation (to not provide an exhaustive list) that binds people together.

Griffin (2009:151) advises that “as relationships [within and between members of the community] becomes more established, irritating habits, conflict, jealousy and friction creeps in to threaten the relationship to drift away.” Griffin (2009:151) goes further to say: “forming a relationship is easy than maintaining it.” This explains why peacebuilding has become an essential component for community life because it is about building and sustaining social relationships.

By extension, the English word ‘peacebuilding’ does not have an equivalent Shona term but can be broken down into two phrases ‘peace building.’ Shona words for peace are beyond the scope of this paper. Moreover, the Shona word for ‘building’ is the adjective *kuvaka* derived from the verb *vaka* (to build) which is usually associated with *chivakwa* (a structure). Traditional Shona peoples did not use the term peacebuilding in everyday speech but there are different ways that they used to express this idea. For them peacebuilding was about peaceful co-existence, harmony, respect,

forgiveness, cooperation, and friendship. For an individual to be peaceful s/he must have had *hunhu* (good manners). A peaceful household, therefore, was depicted as one that reflects social harmony amongst members by not fighting; a household that resolves friction amicably, a household that cooperate with blood relatives and with neighbors (Gelfand, 1999). For purposes of this paper, how the Shona people retained what they considered as peaceful values for their households and communities? What they did to help make their households and communities live in harmony and how they dealt with tension that flared up within households and communities is what I have termed *kuvaka rugare* (peacebuilding). One of the mechanisms that they employed to promote peacebuilding was the use of folk tales.

Typically, folk tales were about conflict and its resolution (Farris, 1993), they usually began with a situation of disharmony, disequilibrium or an abnormality (Fortune, 1982). The nature of conflict contained in folk tales involved a decree, social norm or command which was usually violated by a villain. A villain was an individual or an animal that was at odds with self or the community due to his/her tendencies to violate the cultural norms. The important thing to note is that every conflict was resolved in one way or the other and it is this aspect that is central to this paper. The folk tale below is a classic example of the nature of conflict and its resolution. The principles underlying the resolution of conflict in folk tales can be applied for contemporary peacebuilding practices.

4. THE NATURE OF FOLK TALES

Among the Shona society, folk tales were part of their everyday life. These folk tales were mainly concerned with sustaining relationships, maintaining and inculcating peaceful co-existence between individuals and groups within communities (Chitando, 2008). According to Mazuruse (2010), the Shona past folk tales (*ngano*) have a lot of characterization involving both human and animal characters. In those characters there are heroes representing virtues triumphing over villains who signify vices. In his book *Rurimi Rwaamai Bkuku 4*, TK Tsodzo outlines the different types of *ngano* and their purposes in the Shona life. He maintains that there are three types namely *ngano dzemhuka* (folk tales with animals as characters), *ngano dzavanhu nemhuka* (folk tales with both human and animal characters) and *ngano dzavanhu chete* (folktales with human characters only). This paper examines folk tales with animals as characters.

Gombe (2006:211) in *Tsika DzavaShona* explains the nature and purpose of a Shona folktale. He says;

Shona

1. *Ngano dzaitaurwa dzaigona kusiyana-siyana. Dzimwe dzaitaura...nezvenyatwa, zveumbimbindoga, zveshanje, nezvimwewo...*

2. *Dzimwe dzengano idzi dzaitaura nezvevanhu, as zhinhi dzacho dzaitaura nezvemhuka, van tsuro nagudo. Nyangwe dai ngano idzi dzaitaura hadzo nezvemhuka,*

dzidziso yainge iri madziri yakanga yakananga vanhu chaivo vapenyu. Mhuka zhinji dzomungano dzaitaura savanhu chaivo dzichiitawo tsika dzinoitwa navanhu, sokutaridza ungaru, utsinye, makaro, rudo netsitsi.

3. *Mungano zhinji idzi mhuka diki, kana dziya dzinosvorwa, nherera navanhu vaya vanenge vachitarisirwa pasi ndivo vaizoguma vabudirira kana kuwana makomborero. Izvi zvaidzidzisawo vana kuti vasangosvora mbodza nedzinmozvimbira uye kuti makomborero anonyanga dera. Zvaidzidzisa kuti tinofanira kuremekedza munhu upi zvake, kwete kusvorana.*

Source: Gombe (2006:211).

English Translation

1. Folktales varied in terms of subject matter. Some addressed issues to do with troubles, self-centeredness, and jealousy among other topics.

2. Some folktales had human characters but most of them were based on animal characters such as hare and baboon.

Although these folktales had animal characters, they however were targeted at teaching human beings about life. Most animal characters spoke like humans, behaving like persons. They demonstrated wisdom, cruelty, covetousness, love, and mercy.

3. In these folktales, small animals and those that were often looked down upon ended up at the top of the ladder. The objective was to teach youngsters not to be caught in the trap of despising without knowing that fortunes will one day favor the despised and neglected. They taught that every person regardless of status or size should be accorded his/her due respect.

Further, Gombe (2006) states the importance of *ngano* as a socialization method on issues such as conflict, wisdom, selfishness among others, to youngsters. No area of Shona life was beyond the scope of *ngano*. As paragraph 1 above illustrates, folk tales covered a wide range of subject matters which included among others, moral virtues and vices. Tzodzo (1992:63) concurs with this view when he says; *hapana bande roupenyu risingakanisi kutsanangurwa nengano dzichibatsiranana netsumo* (together with proverbs no area of life was beyond the scope of folk tales).

Also, paragraph 2 clearly illustrates some of the subject matters which were personified by animal characters as one of the common feature of *ngano*. Among traditional societies, the use of animal characters in folk tales was an acceptable teaching device which was meant to drive the nail home by the ancient story teller. As pointed out in paragraph 2, animals in folk tales spoke and behaved like people. For example, in most cases Elephant and Lion played the role of kings, uncles or chiefs representing those people in positions of authority in society. While small animals such as Hare played multiple roles depending on the type of the folk tale. In some instances, Hare was portrayed as a person with wisdom, craftiness and cunning. In other instances, Hare was depicted as a small child or a despised person in society. Other small animals like Rats played the role of nephews while characters such as Baboon were portrayed either as fools or murderers (Tsodzo, 1992). As explained by Gombe (1986) in paragraph 3, there is clear evidence that the Shona past employed folk tales as a way of inculcating peaceful co-existence in society.

While folk tales have their pros, they also have cons. For instance, it is important to note that environments have changed and are constantly changing *visa vie* increase in communication technology. Current peacebuilding activities among the Shona peoples of Zimbabwe habitually work independently and outside the traditional parameters. This seems to partly emanate from modernity which makes a distinction between traditional and modern methods, thus, distorting or effectively invalidating the implicit value of traditional knowledge system¹. Below is an example of a Shona folk tale with animal characterization bent on inculcating peaceful co-existence.

4.1 *Mhembwe naShumba* (Antelope and Lion)

Once upon a time there was an Antelope and her two young ones. One day the Antelope went and seek food for her young ones in the huge wilderness where the lion lived, the Elephant and other many animals live in that wilderness. The Antelope arrived there and started to seek food for her young ones and find the food. As we know that the Antelope is such an animal that is unstable always and when it saw anything that attracted her she kept gazing at it. One of her young ones said mum can you see the Lion that is tied there. They all looked on and looking to the other side, the Lion said “do not be afraid today I am your neighbour for quite a number of years. Come and rescue me.”

The young ones of the Antelope felt compassion and “true mum may you and untie the Lion has suffered”. The Antelope said “if we rescue him he is our enemy and may eat us all today. The antelope felt compassion for its young ones and rescued the lion. As the lion was untying, the lion fell down with hunger. The Lion said “it’s true Antelope I am about to die with hunger may you

¹ In common sense, expressions such as traditional, indigenous or folklore are often perceived as something which existed but is now on the verge of dying, the forgotten about, something out of fashion and which does not matter now or that there is still some individuals/a small group of people practicing something which will die out soon (Palmborg and Kirkegaard, 2002, p.39). In this paper, I have used these phrases interchangeably to mean practices, skills, customs, and worldviews (to not provide an exhaustive list) which sustain the life patterns of a particular group of people.

give me only one of your young ones that I can eat.” The Antelope replied “my child? I rescued you from a snare and now you are requesting to eat my child. No, no!”

The Lion pleaded with the Antelope “please may you give me”. The Antelope felt compassion “can you see now my children I have told you, let us not rescue this lion, he is our enemy and now he wants to eat you.” The Lion ate one of the young ones. After finishing eating, he requested the other one again. The Antelope refused. The lion said “truly I am going to eat all and the mother again.” The Antelope gave the Lion the other young one. The young one was eaten and the Antelope was left alone.

Then Lion said “now I need you”. The Antelope said “no you cannot catch me”. The Lion started to chase the Antelope in the wilderness, chasing the Antelope through the trees.

The Hare asked “what is this? What is this? Wait let’s hear your story”. They all waited. The Antelope said “Hare I have assisted lion when he was suffering very much on when he was on snare and I rescued him. He requested to eat my child I gave him. He said he was not enough I gave him the second one again and he ate. Now he is demanding to eat me up again but I have assisted him”. Then Mr. Hare said “no I do not understand your story well lets return where the event has taken place and I will judge well.”

The all returned. The antelope said “you lion stand up as you was before”, the lion did so and the Antelope said “come now I want to tie you up as you was before”. The Lion came and was tied as it was before. As the Lion was tied the hare said “now tell me your story”. They said their story; then hare said “okay tomorrow you antelope know that assisting an enemy it’s not good he will eat you”. They left the Lion in that condition. That is where the the story ended! (*Adapted from G. Fortune Ngano, Vol. 4, 2012, pp.6-10, my own translated English version*).

4.2 Discussion

Conflict occurs when interdependent individuals or groups simultaneously pursue incompatible behaviours, perceptions, goals, needs, interests and values while perceiving their interdependence as negative (Adler and Towne, 1990; Chetkow-Yanoov, 1997; Tillett, 1999a; 1999b; Reychler and Paffenholz, 2001; Warner, 2001). By its very nature, conflict is not static. Once a conflict emerges it either escalates or de-escalates. The predominant responses: fight; flight or problem-solving approaches are usually compatible with what a particular individual or group is more accustomed to. Conflict resolution is a process which aims at bringing the warring parties together in the hope that they can find solutions which leave them all satisfied. Dialogue or facilitated dialogue with subsequent co-existence is one of the characteristics of the resolution of conflict (Isenhardt and Spangle, 2000; 2000b; Tillett, 1999,). For purposes of this paper, conflict resolution is one of the aspects within a broader aims of peacebuilding.

4.2.1 Disequilibrium

This conflict begins with Mr. Lion who was trapped in a snare and needed some assistance to get him out of this life threatening situation. This is demonstrated in line 6 (mum can you see the Lion that is tied there, Mr. Lion is trapped in a snare). The entry point indicates that one day Antelope as she was walking around in the company of her little ones, she saw Mr. Lion trapped in a snare to vindicate the abnormality of this situation.

4.2.2 Social Norm, Violation and Consequences

In addition, the folktale shows that Antelope was hasty in her decision. In other words, she violated the norm *machimbidzike akazyara mandinonokera* (the I am hasty gave birth to I am late). The consequences were that Antelope lost her two little one to Mr. Lion. Mr. Lion on the other hand, violated the norm; loves your enemy. The accompanying consequences were that Mr. Lion was outwitted by Mr. Hare and got the taste of his own medicine for terrorizing an enemy and violating the law of love.

4.2.3 Resolution of the Conflict

The resolution of the conflict involved Mr. Lion who was successfully outwitted by Mr. Hare and he found himself trapped again in a snare.

4.2.4 An Analysis of the Role of Folk Tales in Promoting Peacebuilding: Antelope and Lion

The entry point of the conflict is that one of the parties (Antelope) is reluctant to confront the conflict with the hope that it will go away. This style is commonly known as withdrawal or avoidance and it is characterized by low assertiveness and low cooperation. In a real world, when the parties perceive that there is no chance of gaining what they want and that the potential damage of confrontation is great, they may adopt avoidance as a style of addressing conflict. In line 9 Antelope seems to have considered the potential danger of confrontation.

In contrast, this folktale teaches the value of openness while discouraging fundamentalism (Fortune, 2012). Openness in this context is understood as the ability to offer assistance to those with whom one is at law-guides with especially when such individuals are in need. The little ones urged Antelope to assist Mr. Lion who was in dire need. Antelope explained to her little ones that Mr. Lion was one of their arch-enemy and therefore assisting him would cost them their lives.

After emotional pressure from her little ones, Antelope gave in (Fortune, 2012). This is demonstrated in Line 8 to 10 when a heated debate ensued over whether Mr. Lion should be offered assistance or not. The little ones signify secondary actors to the conflict who although they have a stake on the outcome are not aware of some historical factors surrounding the conflict. To show that the little ones were not aware of the implications of hasty decisions, Antelope explained the implications when she said *tikamusunungura, uyu muvengi wedu, angatidye tese nhasi* (if we loosen him, he is our enemy, he can eat us all today) (line 9). The word *angatidye tese nhasi* (he can eat us all today) indicates the predator-prey relationship which signifies that human beings will always experience conflict of interests. That individuals who experience conflict of interests are also friends is demonstrated in line 7 when Mr. Lion said *ndiri hama yenyu* (I too am your relative). By saying "I am your relative" Mr. Lion was appealing to the common nature that the animal kingdom shares equally. This appeal is the one that generated debate between Antelope and her little ones over whether Mr. Lion should be assisted or not.

Nevertheless, debates on the appeal by Mr. Lion for mercy from Antelope is a perpetual reminder of the dilemma often experienced by disputants when they are faced with a situation to give in to other individual's demands in a conflict situation. It is at this stage that openness is considered a mark of maturity especially when it is done to those who are experiencing suffering like Mr. Lion. In a real world, it is often very easy and understandable to be friendly to one's companions but to befriend an enemy takes courage and sacrifice. This folk tale is based on the premise that even enemies should be befriended.

In line 10, the mention *vakanzwa tsitsi vakasunungura Shumba* (they showed mercy and loosened Mr. Lion) indicates that when human beings are at their best they can consider the needs of others more than themselves. This is demonstrated when Antelope assisted Mr. Lion to meet his need (to be loosened from the snare). In line 11 to 12, the loosening of Mr. Lion indicates that Antelope recognized her obligation to Mr. Lion. The point is any conflict of interests must respect the needs of others by means of cooperation given that conflict is one of the sub-behaviors of non-cooperation.

In the context of a conflict, cooperation is superior to non-cooperation. This explains why Antelope decided to cooperate with Mr. Lion even if they disagreed on some particular issues such as that Mr. Lion asked Antelope to supply him food to abate his hunger. In this article, cooperation is taken to mean the extent to which one party to a conflict attempts to satisfy the other party's concerns. Accordingly, Antelope used cooperation as a style of addressing conflict which is contrasted by Mr. Lion's assertiveness. Assertiveness is the extent to which the party to a conflict attempts to satisfy his/her own concerns at the expense of other's interests. In line 14, Mr. Lion ate Antelope's little one and demanded for another (line 15). High assertiveness and low cooperation breeds resentment because the other party does not usually buy-in to the solution since it is imposed.

As evidence suggests, this folk tale is bent on undermining fundamentalism. In simpler terms, fundamentalism relates to individuals who neither turn to the right or to the left but keeps tied to what s/he believes to be the right thing to do for him/herself. This is demonstrated when Mr. Lion after eating Antelope's two little ones, demanded to eat Antelope.

A closer analysis of actions by both parties indicates that Antelope used compromise as a style to address advances by Mr. Lion. Solutions resulting from compromise are often short-lived (not-sustainable) because the parties are likely to lose sight of larger issues, principles and objectives. This is demonstrated when Mr. Lion chased Antelope in order to kill her. This action by Mr. Lion is a perpetual reminder that there are individuals in community who often feels that they have the superior right to demand their needs and interests from other members of the community.

In line 24, the coming in of Mr. Hare into the scene as a watch dog and arbitrator indicates that those who claim to have power to terrorize others have no right whatsoever to take advantage of the weak. Another point to note is that every person is a fellow and therefore it is unacceptable to undermine their interests (This is demonstrated when Mr. Lion ate Antelope's little ones). Eating is here taken to mean divergent views with attendant violence. When Mr. Lion demanded the right to eat Antelope to which Antelope refused the point is disagreement is a natural phenomenon but the parties should shun violence (a point which is demonstrated by Antelope when she decided to run away). Also, when Mr. Lion chased Antelope this signifies an escalating conflict which resulted in fighting. The point is in communities there are certain individuals who find pleasure in terrorizing others.

On one hand, the run after Antelope by Mr. Lion (line 23) indicate that in communities some individuals are inferior to others. Nevertheless, the intervention by Mr. Hare who expressed consternation at the scene indicates behavior that is anti-social. The point is conflict does not necessarily means that the parties must engage in antagonistic behaviors. The expression by Mr. Hare *mirai tinzwe nyaya yenyu* (hold on for a moment before I hear your bone of contention) indicates that individuals that terrorize others are not welcome in the community (Fortune, 2012). The word *nyaya* (story) means a matter for discussion/argument (Hannan, 1996). Implied in Mr. Hare's words is that fellow individuals should not use fighting as a means of addressing their differences but dialogue. The underlying principle is that fighting is not an option because Antelope and Mr. Lion both share a common spark of life since they are all members of the community. Furthermore, Mr. Hare's advice for the parties to consider dialogue indicates that while disagreement may be natural; fighting is not a natural right for the powerful. This is demonstrated when Mr. Lion succumbed to the trickster, Mr. Hare.

Consequently, when Mr. Hare succeeded in outwitting Mr. Lion, that fundamentalism was undermined is beyond question. The point is inferior members of the community will always require the assistance of others. Thus, when Mr. Lion got trapped into the snare for the second time this is clear evidence that individuals who terrorize others are not welcome in the community. To this end, as evidence suggests, folk tales are an important genre among the Shona in providing clues on how conflict should be resolved. In fact, folk tales justify behavior that is commendable. Gelfand (1965); Fortune (1980) in agreement with Chitando (2008) point out that the Shona do not encourage violence, the worship of strength, speed or fighting between human beings. Their underlying value is peace. That being the case, modern communities can learn a great deal about conflict, its resolution and how to sustain peaceful co-existence, forgiveness and reconciliation.

5. WAY FORWARD

There are a number of lessons that can be learnt from Shona folk tales. Firstly, the above folk tale indicates that the phenomenon of conflict is understood among Shona communities. In other words, folk tales reveal at philosophical level the important differences in conceptualization of conflict across the different cultures. Second, facilitated dialogue is depicted as one of the most important strategies whenever a conflict occurs. Finally, the folk tale above provides a framework for addressing conflict that is, facilitated dialogue. As evidence suggests, facilitated dialogue is unavoidable because in any disagreements disputants do not just disengage and start living together as if nothing has ever happened to their relationship. The fears, angers, mistrust and hate that usually accompany conflict have to be dealt with during a facilitated dialogue. Overall, the depiction of conflict by folk tales indicates how conflict should be addressed. In particular, some principles underlying this and other folk tales can be applied especially to modern Shona communities that have experienced protracted conflict and electoral violence in the 2000s.

Apart from that, the important thing to note is that folk tales are about peace. The process of promoting peace to achieve social harmony, tolerance or co-existence is what is widely understood as peacebuilding. Unfortunately for modern communities going without folk tales is perceived to be the norm but in real sense peace is totally dependent on some cultural norms and values embedded in indigenous knowledge systems of a particular group of people. This therefore, suggests that folk tales are an important resource for peace given that tolerance and co-existence proves to be lacking in modern communities judging by violent cases especially those related to political differences. As such, contemporary peacebuilding should blend with indigenous ways of promoting peace if tolerance and co-existence are to be achieved.

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